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Vermont's wildlands deserve better protection

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By Bill McKibben | April 20, 2006

LOOKING EAST FROM the shoulder of Romance Mountain in Vermont's Green Mountain Range, you could easily be 2,000 miles away in the Rockies. The landscape is corrugated, crenellated, cragged, coniferous, a place as wild and as lovely as any on the continent.

And looking east, if you squint, you can also see the past and the future -- a future that offers some hope for American values after a dark stretch of extremist opposition to anything environmental.

This is land that Vermont's congressman and senators included earlier this month in their proposal for new wilderness in the state. Not a huge patch -- the proposed Battell Wilderness would cover just 12,000 acres, and along the entire spine of the Greens the delegation included only 48,000 acres in its plan.

If it is adopted by the House and Senate and signed by the president, the plan, even combined with existing wildernesses, will still leave Vermont with barely 1 1/2 percent of its land protected as forever wild -- much less than New Hampshire (3 percent) or New York, with its mighty Adirondacks (7 percent of the state preserved forever).

The wilderness proposal should have been thousands of acres larger -- important tracts along the southern flank of the Green Mountains were left unprotected. Still, for all its modesty, it's a remarkably sweet prospect because it honors both the intentions of a few visionaries from the past and the wishes of an enormous majority in the present.

The Battell Wilderness, for instance, carries the name of Joseph Battell, one of those 19th-century figures it's nearly impossible to imagine today.

He used his inherited wealth for any number of projects -- ensuring the future of the Morgan horse breed, donating the summit of Camels Hump to the state of Vermont, and building the fabulous Breadloaf compound high on the western slope of the Greens where Robert Frost would later hold court for decades.

Battell left most of his land to his alma mater, Middlebury College, with the hope that it would stay unlogged and open to the public for generations to come.

Some of that legacy was protected two decades ago with the creation of the Breadloaf Wilderness, and more of his land will be preserved under this new bill.

But where conservation was once a product of a few far-seeing elites, in the years since World War II it emerged as one of the very few things that almost all Americans could firmly agree on.

Huge majorities cheered as Democratic and Republican leaders combined to set aside wilderness land across the country.

People understood that this permanent protection was one of the few promises they could make to the generations that will follow us, and to the rest of creation as well.

Those majorities are still intact. In Vermont, for example, polling clearly shows that 80 percent of the state's residents favor more wilderness land in the state. There are very few things aside from maple syrup and Ben & Jerry's ice cream that would draw those kinds of numbers.

Even in the towns right along the national forest, like my home of Ripton, huge majorities want more wildlands. And they're in line with Americans as a whole, 75 percent of whom recently told pollsters that "protecting the environment is so important requirements and standards cannot be too high."

In recent years, though, the effort to protect such places has foundered, here and around the country. Special interests with plenty of money have managed to turn public lands into their own profit centers.

It's been painful to watch as the Rocky Mountain Front Range, "America's Serengeti," has been turned over to oil drillers, or to see the vast rangeland of Wyoming pockmarked with gas wells.

Earlier this year, an amendment was inserted into a budget bill that would have opened millions of acres in public lands, including tracts in national monuments and wilderness areas, to purchase by mining companies and other commercial interests.

It was, in the words of reporter Christina Larson in *The Washington Monthly*, the biggest divestiture of public lands in almost a century, "and it was happening completely under the radar, with no floor vote, no public hearings, and no debate."

But it turns out the anti-environmentalists had overreached. Suddenly hunting and fishing groups were joining with conservationists to set up phone banks and write letters. Within a few weeks the legislation was withdrawn.

And now, with proposals like the Vermont Wilderness Act, it's high time to get back on the consensus road to long-term protection.

There will be some opposition -- even in Vermont there are big mill owners, for instance, who want every single acre of the state left open to logging. But it's clear what the people as a whole want -- wildlands permanently protected along the spine of the Greens. Washington should give it to them.

Bill McKibben is the author of nine books, most recently "Wandering Home" about his travels through the Champlain Valley and the Adirondacks. ■